



December 2007

Volume 38, Number 4

OUR FAVORITE RENTON SANTAS: LEWIS ARGANO

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

Little Luigi Argano arrived in the U.S. at the age of nine, traveling from Genoa with his mother and five of his six brothers and sisters. They made the arduous trip across the Atlantic in a second-class berth, and still had 3000 more miles to travel to join father Guiseppi and brother Raphael. Their train trip ended in Newcastle on December 24, 1913. Surrounded by cousins, aunts, and uncles, young Luigi was delighted to spend his first Christmas in America.¹ It was the first time he'd ever exchanged gifts on Christmas. Later in life, he never missed an opportunity to recreate that joyful experience for other children by bringing Santa to life. Looking back, everything in his life seemed to be leading to this special role—his confirmation name was even “Nicholas”!²

His father Joseph Argano was ambitious and determined to provide a better life for his children. Joseph began his American life in the coal mines, but quickly saved enough money to return to his shoe repair and sales business. He opened Argano Modern Shoe Store in downtown Renton, and then expanded into real estate, becoming a landlord for businesses situated in the Argano Building at Third and Smithers. Joseph Argano's success meant that Lewis could focus on his studies, when not helping out at the shoe store. Lewis graduated from Renton High School in 1926. Two years later he decided to go to Ellensburg Normal School to become a teacher.³



Above: Lewis Argano, 1930
(#1987.054.2501)

But young Lewis wasn't all work, and his early theatrical interests hinted at his future as an annual Santa. He may have inherited the theatrical bug from his father, who once considered opening a movie theater with a partner. When the partner backed out, Benjamin Fey happened to be looking for a theater to lease in Renton, and he opened his Renton Theatre in the Argano Building. Later Joseph Argano leased the Rainier Theatre building to Jensen von Herberg. Young Lewis enjoyed acting from an early age, taking part in plays and operettas in grade school and high school. He was a founding member of the Community Players and also pursued acting at Ellensburg.

Lewis even briefly made a try at movie acting in Hollywood in 1932. While visiting a sister in Los Angeles, he and a friend made the rounds of the studios, looking for work. “I used to visit a lot of the studios hoping to get in, but in those days, they were having trouble producing movies,” Lewis remembered in 1986. “Another young man and I... found out that they were filming a French scene and the casting director thought that this friend of mine and I were ‘French’ enough that we could take part.” They showed up at RKO Studios at 6 a.m., only to find out that the parts were promised to two other actors. “And that was the end,” Lewis recalled, “I would have loved to have stayed... I thought that would be a stepping stone for future work for me, but it didn't work out that way because I spent almost forty years in education.”⁴ Almost as soon as his Hollywood part fell through, he received a job offer to teach at Campbell Hill School.

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Masthead Photo: Another of Renton's Santas at the Columbine Rebekah Lodge Christmas party, 1925. (#2000.024.5301)



Renton Historical Quarterly

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Renton History Museum

235 Mill Avenue South

Renton, WA 98057

Phone: 425.255.2330

FAX: 425.255.1570

Hours:

Tuesday - Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

Admission: \$3 for adults

\$1 for children

Always free to members and to the general public on the first Wednesday and third Saturday of the month.

Board Meetings: Please call the museum for time and location.



President's Message

By Bob Hunt, President

All right! Now is the time for you almost-volunteers! If you have been thinking that you want to do something for your community and the Renton Historical Society, and the future of the Museum is something that you are interested in, this is your big chance.

Many of you don't find yourselves attracted to the idea of being a docent or working with the folks doing oral histories. You're looking for a **project. You know, something with a beginning, middle, end, and some sort of PRODUCT! Have we got a deal for you!**

The Society is looking for some volunteers to be part of a team that will work on a Museum Master Plan during 2008. This team will develop a Request for Proposals, work with the City of Renton to choose an appropriate consulting firm, oversee the Master Plan process, and finally review and consult on the final report, including a presentation to the Community Services Director and the City Council.

You don't have to know how to do this stuff, so don't worry that you don't have the right experience. You should be somewhat organized, be able to work cooperatively with a diverse group, and have some idea of why the preservation of Renton's history is important to the community. The commitment is not too awful; the team will meet a couple of times a month during the first couple of months and then approximately once a month through the rest of the year. We have the Library effort to model from, as they are in a similar process and much further along. We also have an approved scope of work that Liz has prepared to get us kicked off.

So, what are you gonna do? This is about the most tailored opportunity ever, and just the one you've been waiting for. Yeah, I can come up with all sorts of excuses why this isn't the right time if I want to stall, too. The fact is the time will never be better than now and the potential exists for you to be part of a plan that lays the groundwork for the next few decades of heritage education and preservation in Renton.

Contact Liz Stewart at the museum, 425-255-2330 or EStewart@ci.renton.wa.us and she'll get you a form to fill in. We want to be working on task in January, so don't forget about this during the Christmas rush.

Hope to see you and looking forward to having an energetic team.

Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

In the last newsletter I wrote that this fall would be a “study” period for the Museum, with CMAP and CAP assessors coming through and giving us the benefit of their expert knowledge. Just a reminder: Museum staff applied to these two federally funded programs—the Collections Management Assessment Program (CMAP) and the Conservation Assessment Program (CAP)—to bring peer reviewers in to provide us suggestions for improvement in the handling of our collections and our historic building. James Burns, Curator of History for the Tempe Historical Museum, visited us in August, and Preservation Architect Donna Hartmans and Conservator Diana Dicus toured the Museum in October and November.



Although we don't have all three final reports yet, the site visits themselves were wonderful learning experiences for staff and trustees. We had a chance to sit down with these three very knowledgeable museum professionals and talk about what our goals are as an institution and how we can best achieve them. During this process, for example, it became pretty clear that our current offsite storage will be inadequate for future growth of the collection. If we want to be able to continue to build a first-class collection that documents and preserves Renton's heritage, we will have to come up with more and better offsite storage that is climate-controlled, watertight, pest-free, and secure.

Donna, Diana, and James did give us some good news, too. Donna pronounced our historic fire station very “stout,” and she was impressed by its good condition in spite of the Puget Sound region's tendency toward earthquakes. They also appreciated the fact that the Historical Society is committed enough to collection care that it has hired a full-time Collection Manager, particularly such a competent and conscientious one.

While we're looking forward to their reports, we're getting a jump-start on conserving an important part of our collection. 4Culture, the King County agency that provides culture grants with lodging tax money, recently awarded the Museum funds for the historical reconstruction of our coal mine car in partnership with the Northwest Railway Museum. The Railway Museum has a new state-of-the-art conservation facility in Snoqualmie as well as a cadre of volunteers experienced in rail car restoration. The project will get underway in late January—watch our City of Renton website for updates about its progress!

Here's wishing you and your family a Happy Holiday season, and a New Year full of history!

Liz Stewart

Our Favorite Renton Santas continued from page 1

After some years teaching at the Campbell Hill School and then the Henry Ford School, Lewis found a way to incorporate show business into his teaching career. The state of Washington decreed that school districts would develop audiovisual departments to bring movie projectors, filmstrips, and record players into classrooms. Superintendent Oliver Hazen knew that Lewis had taken courses in audiovisual materials at the University of Washington, so he tapped Lewis to become director of the school district's Instructional Materials Department. He held that position for 25 years.⁵

Sometime in the 1940s, Lewis Argano began playing Santa Claus annually at the Renton Hardware store, taking photographs with children as they made their under-the-tree requests. By this time, he was also involved with Kiwanis and the Renton Rotary Club, as well as the Knights of Columbus, and he managed to bring his dramatic talents to all these organizations, in and out of a Santa suit.⁶

Santa was spread pretty thin in Renton in the 1940s and 1950s, as local stores and businesses competed to convince parents that they didn't have to travel to Seattle to see the real thing. In 1945 Santa was so busy around town that the Chamber of Commerce had to develop a schedule for him, and Renton Rotary, Kiwanis, the Lions Club, the Chamber—including Lewis Argano—and the Recreation Council put together a welcoming committee. "Old St. Nick will take advantage of the end of gasoline rationing," the *Renton Chronicle* reported, "to travel in his big bus which is of a size to hold many goodies."⁷ Santa later told Mrs. Claus that he'd visited over 4000 children in the Renton area, making stops at schools, community centers, the hospital, and even the Briscoe Memorial School for Boys. Santa finished his four-day sojourn in the Renton area with a stop in downtown on Christmas eve that year.⁸



Above: Kiwanis Vaudeville Show, 1939. Lewis Argano (standing at center) was the director of "Kiwanis Karnival Kapers." (#1966.044.0434)



Above: Lewis Argano as Santa.

Parents, merchants, and newspaper publishers were understandably tight-lipped about Santa's *real* identity, but Lewis Argano's daughter, Kathy Argano McKnight, remembers that Renton Hardware Store owner George Dobson asked her father to take over the role when the previous Santa promised more than one child's parents could deliver. Superintendent Hazen OK'ed Mr. Argano's temporary role, and Lewis took up his station in a big chair in the hardware store window for many years. His daughter recalls that he took great pleasure in getting his padded stomach and rosy cheeks just right for the part. He brought unique talents to the role, too. One year a little girl sat on his lap and didn't say a word when Santa asked her what she wanted for Christmas. Her mother told Santa that the child had just arrived from Italy and couldn't speak a word of English. Imagine their surprise when Santa asked her again, in Italian this time, what he could bring her!⁹

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Our Favorite Renton Santas from page 5

As everyone who was ever a kid knows, it takes many Santas to make the holidays bright. With his love for children and his childhood memories of a harder time, Lewis Argano brought a special enthusiasm and wonder to the part, and certainly brightened the season for many a family.

Do you have a favorite Renton Santa? Please donate your photos and stories to the Renton History Museum, and we'll feature them next year in the December newsletter.

Right: Santa Lewis put a lot of time and effort into his Christmas identity. (Courtesy of Kathy Argano McKnight)



Above: Kathy Argano and her friend visit Santa, 1951. (Courtesy of Kathy Argano McKnight)



Above: The Arganos' Christmas card, ca. 1954. (Courtesy of Kathy Argano McKnight)

- ¹ See Steve Anderson, "Arrivederci Italia! Guiseppi e' Rosaria Argano Arrivano in America," *Renton Historical Society & Museum Quarterly*, November 1999, p.1+. Lewis Argano also remembered the trip in an oral history in the Museum's collection, taken 3 April 1986.
- ² Lewis Argano, "I was Only Nine....," unpublished essay, n.d. ("Lewis Argano" vertical file, Renton History Museum); Author's telephone conversation with Kathy Argano McKnight, 21 November 2007.
- ³ Anderson, "Arrivederci Italia"; Argano Oral History.
- ⁴ Argano Oral History, p. 15.
- ⁵ Argano Oral History, p. 19.
- ⁶ Dean A. Radford, "Residents Share Memories of City's Centennial," *South County Journal*, 29 August, 2001, p.A9.
- ⁷ "Santa Claus Is Coming," *Renton Chronicle*, 6 December 1945, p.1.
- ⁸ Santa's itinerary was published in "Welcome Santa Claus," *Renton Chronicle*, 20 December 1945, p.1. Santa wrote an open letter to Mrs. Claus in "Merry Christmas To All And To All A Good Night," *Renton Chronicle*, 27 December 1945, p. 1.
- ⁹ Author's telephone conversation with Kathy Argano McKnight, 26 November 2007.

From the Collections Department...

By: Sarah Iles, Collection Manager



As I have been getting to know our collection over the past year and a half, I have come across many photos of dogs. I have always been a dog-lover and have really enjoyed looking at these photographs. After compiling a list of several, I decided to share these with everyone and include them in the newsletter. Enjoy!

Dogs were first domesticated around 15,000 years ago and were probably the first animal domesticated by humans. Their functions as domesticated animals occupy a great range and include: guards, herders, hunters, rescuers, sled pullers, and simply, companions. Since mankind's early associations with the dog, the dog has cemented its relationship with humans as "man's best friend."

The people who came west and settled in Renton in the early days of Washington Territory were no exception. Many of the early family photographs in our collection have dogs seated along with the family, sometimes in a place of



Above: Unknown child and dog, ca 1885. Child could possibly be a member of the Custer family. (RHM# 2000.127.8940)



Above: Jack Stewart, R.C. Roberts, George Evans, Andy Stewart and Jim Evans, 1894. The hunting party is accompanied by four dogs, two of which appear to be hound dogs. (RHM# 1989.062.1656)



Above: Ada (Smithers) Thorne and family playing croquet outside their home on 3rd Avenue, ca 1891. The dog is lying in the middle of the croquet course. (RHM# 1995.077.4117)

honor. Photographs were not commonplace at that time and the fact that people included their dogs in the family portraits shows how important and loved they were.



Above: John and Janet Faull family, 1910. The dog's name was Toby. The youngest daughter, Viola, would dress him up in her doll clothes and push him around in her baby buggy. (RHM# 41.4201)



Above: Victor Parker and his dog Mack, 1896. Victor was a grandson of two Renton pioneers, Captain Robert Brown and David Parker. (RHM# 1969.002.0276)

Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator



We are about to finish our Fall 2007 Speaker Program. In October the museum hosted a very informative and interesting presentation by Roger Fernandes about traditional Salish art. Roger also shared with the audience stories and myths of the First People. In November Peter J. Fromm talked about human interactions with whales and showed us many slides documenting those encounters. It was a very enlightening presentation proving how little humans know about whales. Karen Haas attracted a small crowd portraying Mrs. Calvin Adams, the gossipy wife of a St. Louis tavern keeper. She shared the latest stories after Lewis and Clark's Corp of Discovery returned safely to St. Louis in September of 1806.

In October the museum started offering free tours at 11:00 a.m. on the third Saturday of every month. These tours are appropriate for elementary students through adults. Please encourage your family members and friends to come for a tour. The museum has updated the coal mining display and, in addition, the colorful Roxy Theater sign complements the rest of the exhibits. Many Rentonians remember going to the Roxy between 1930s and 2001. Some of them had their first dates there that ended in later marriages.

Two new volunteers joined our team of 49. Amy Jung S. Lee previously volunteered at the Food Bank and as president of the Women's Association at St. Andrews Catholic Church. She has already started greeting visitors at the museum and will attend docent training to become a tour guide. Sean Greene has been an intern at Wal-Mart, Salvation Army, and Valley Medical Center. He is currently developing key word indexes to oral history transcripts in the museum's collection. His work will allow future researchers to access oral information about different topics. WELCOME ABOARD!!!

Contributions to the General Fund

*Shirley Gaunt-Smith
Katherine Petrich*

Contributions through the Renton Community Foundation to the Renton Historical Society Fund

*As a thank-you to Dorota Rahn for giving tour to the
Sister City Delegation
By Doug & Sonja Kyes*



Holiday Hours & Events

Closed:

**Saturday, December 22 to
Tuesday, January 1**

"American Legends in Story and Song," with Allan Hirsch

**Saturday, December 8
Sing along with tunes based in
American folklore!**

Renton Historical Society Holiday Open House

**Tuesday, December 11
3:00 – 5:00 p.m. at the Museum**
Join your Historical Society friends for light refreshments, with accordion accompaniment by John Giuliani, Jr. and John Giuliani, Sr.!



New Memberships

Katherine Petrich family
Vicki Delaurenti Utterstrom family
Estela Cube family
Diane Fobes family
Gregory Chaney
Shirley Gaunt-Smith
Gordon Gullingsrod

Christmas Shopping at the Renton History Museum

The Museum Gift Shop has a nice selection of books to choose from for gifts or your own enjoyment. A few of the new ones are:

Northwest Wild, with beautiful photos of Northwest nature
The Pacific Northwest Landscape, A Painted History
Field Guide to the Orca, including maps and direction for whale watching
Native Peoples of the Northwest
Images of America: Vanishing Seattle
Images of America: The Eastside
Renton—From Coal to Jets, revised
The Mining Camps Speak: A New Way to Explore the Ghost Towns of the American West

The Renton Centennial afghan is also available again, as well as more Henry Ford School slates.



Join the Renton Historical Society Today!

Name: _____

Membership Level: _____

Business Name: _____

Address: _____

City:State: _____ Zip: _____ + 4 (_____)

Please make checks payable to the Renton Historical Society.

VISA/MASTERCARD # _____ Ex.Date: _____

Your Signature: _____

- Please share your e-mail address with us: _____
 Please send me a volunteer application form. (32/1)

Mail To: Membership Secretary, Renton Historical Society
235 Mill Avenue South, Renton, Washington 98057-2133

Please Choose Membership Category & Any Donation You Wish To Make:

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(partially tax deductible) _____
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Total enclosed: _____

denotes former Society Life Member



Obituaries

(September 1 to December 1)

denotes former Society member



Anita M. Anderson

Marina L. Luckey 

Hazel R. Ruffalo

Harriet Caldwell Beaman 

Dorothy Mead

William C. Sharpsteen

John L. Belmondo 

Donald L. Morrow

Donna Sportsman

Betty Gilbert Brustad 

Elsa E. Norris

Joseph Svabosky

Douglas M. Buck

Elizabeth Duke Picini 

Joann Swartosky

Clara Buckley Cocanower

Clifford "Tick" Rost

Sylvia Mae Tulip

John H. Conkle 

Jack Crawford

Irene E. Girias

Glenda Hunkapiller

Ruth D. Jane

Mark A. Hyler



Rentonians Remembered

**Harriet Caldwell
Beaman**

John & Eleanor Bertagni

John L. Belmondo

Judith Zanga; Rosie & Bob Prandi

**Jennie Bertagni
Bozzello**

John & Eleanor Bertagni; Louise Bertozzi; Joe & Loretta Starkovich; William & Karen Sparrow

Douglas Buck

Scott & Gaye McClellan; Rick & Terre Scappini; Beth & Mike Potoshnik; Sharon & Ron Clymer

Chuck Burdulis

Gayle & Warren Jones

Virginia Busato

Jim & Fran Bourasa

Ed Byers

Lillian Rosenstrom

**Pauline Sauve
Carpine**

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Lila Campen

John Cline

Homer & June Dolen

Jack Crawford

Ron & Sharon Clymer

**Anne Sherertz
Geissler**

Marilyn Wooton; Connie & David Powell; Kelly & Dan Nance; Ila Hemm; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Lila Campen

Irene Girias

Gloria Duffey, Florence Delaurenti; Louise George

Aaron Goodwin

John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin

Eva Goodwin

John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin

Lorraine Goodwin

John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin

Judy Gregor

John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin

Skip Gregor

John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin

Frances "Dee" Hughes

Rosemary Grassi; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Gladys Larson

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Marina Luckey

Gloria Duffey; Florence Delaurenti; Louise George; Beth & Mike Potoshnik; John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin; Anita & Clarence Burkett; Rachel Thomas; Lillian Rosenstrom

Sylvia Petty

Verna Koshak

Elizabeth Duke Picini

Shirley Phinney; Lila Campen

Dolores Popp

Lillian Rosenstrom

Peter G. Pritchard

Pearl Jacobson

Clifford "Tick" Rost

John & Eleanor Bertagni; Betty Sipila; Beth & Mike Potoshnik; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Rachel Thomas

Virginia Secrest

John & Joyce Peterson; Charles Goodwin

Alice Shindeldecker

Betty Sipila

Laura Shook

Jim & Fran Bourasa

Diana Galiano Shuman

Homer & June Dolen; Flora Katzer

Don Shuman

Homer & June Dolen; Flora Katzer

Jim Slough

Gayle & Warren Jones

Kenneth N. Sparrow

Robert O'Donnell

William G. Thomas

Rachel Thomas

Memorials

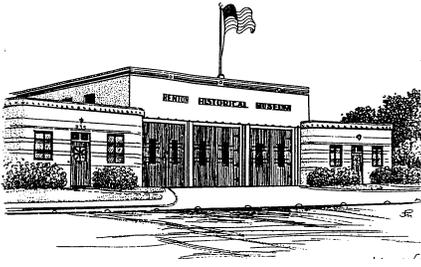
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Peter G. Pritchard

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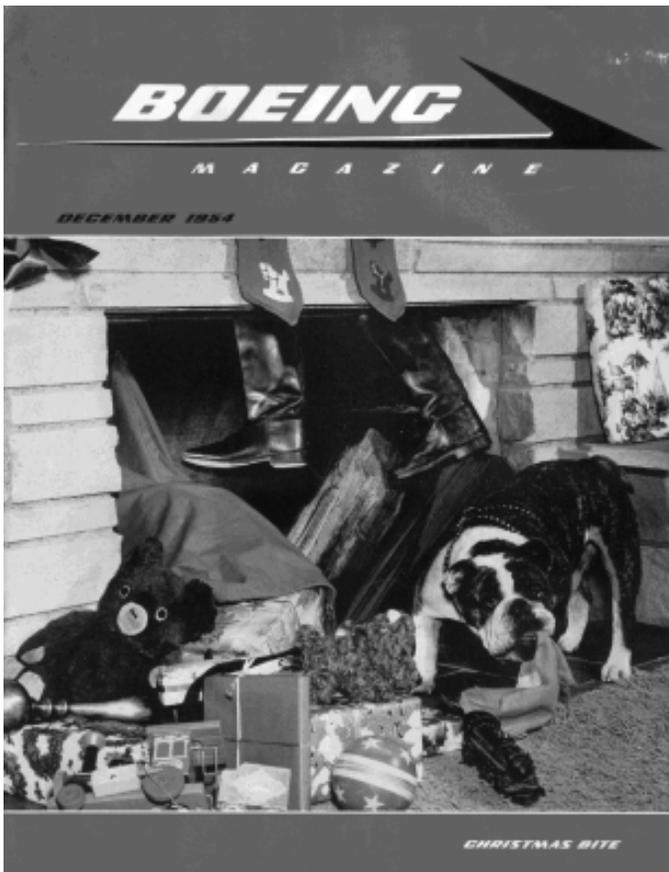
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In Hindsight...



Cover of the December 1954 Boeing Magazine. Photographer Vern Manion had a tough time getting Spruggins the bulldog to pose. (#2006.033.009)

CHRISTMAS BITE